

MIRACLE OF BETHESDA.

Its Circumstances Considered.

When a writer tells us that hitherto that every commentator has failed to understand correctly the meaning of a passage in one of the Gospels, the Catholic reader is apt to be somewhat skeptical as to the value of the alleged discovery. There is less hazard in making such a claim when it is the meaning of some words in the Psalms or the Prophets that is in question. The obscurity of the poetic style and the corruptions of the Hebrew text are here admitted by all to render much exegetical work merely tentative. But the interpretation of the Gospels is not beset by the same difficulty. Moreover, since the days of the early Fathers, their every word has been weighed and pondered by devout and learned men with such care and reverence that it seems almost incredible that it should have been reserved for the present day to find out the true interpretation of a passage. It is usually the case, too, that these novel explanations proceed from some adherent of the critical school whose object it is to reduce the miraculous element in the Gospels to a minimum. It may therefore not be devoid of interest to our readers to give some account of a remarkable article which appeared in the January number of the Theologische Quartalschrift of this year dealing with the cure of the sick man by Our Lord at the pool in the Probatica, which St. John tells us had acquired the name Bethesda—or as is more correctly written, Bethsaida.

Although the author of this article—Father Van Beber—proposes an interpretation of the circumstances of the miracle which is to a large extent completely new, his work, as will be seen, is inspired by no spirit of destructive criticism. Indeed, we believe that for the future no commentator on St. John, whether he agree or disagree with Father Van Beber's conclusions, will be able to leave his views unconsidered.

The first question which any writer on this subject is called upon to deal with is the character of the healings which St. John describes as occurring in the pool previous to our Lord's miracle. An opinion has lately gained ground that the events described by the Evangelist were not miraculous, but were the effect of an intermittent mineral spring possessed of powerful medicinal properties, and on that account much frequented by the sick and infirm of Jerusalem. This view is comparatively modern, and was first propounded by Protestant writers; it was accepted, however, during the last century by several Catholic commentators of considerable weight. Color is lent to it by the fact that, as most of our readers will be aware, the verse in which it is stated that the troubling of the water is absent in the text of the best MSS., and is regarded as spurious by a large number of the most competent critics. Hence it is no small advantage to the discussion of the passage by Father Van Beber that he prescinds entirely from the statements contained in the disputed words, and simply inquires whether this theory of miraculous healings is consistent with the uncontentious portion of the narrative, and with such evidence as we are able to gather from other sources.

There can be little doubt that he is right in his conclusion that the theory is quite untenable. There is, in fact, overwhelming testimony that the city of Jerusalem possessed at all times but a single spring of any importance—the fountain of Siloe so frequently mentioned in the Bible. Josephus expressly declares this to have been the only fountain within the walls of the city (Bell. Jud. 5, 9, 4). Tacitus also may be cited as a witness, as in his account of the siege of the city, he mentions as a circumstance favorable to the beleaguered population their possession of a perennial fountain within the walls—thus asserting by implication that one, and one only, existed. The pilgrim Antoninus has the same tale to tell: "Hierosolyma aquam fontem" (De Locis Sanctis, c. 16). Nor indeed is the state of things different at the present day. The defenders of the theory cite the existence of the intermittent "Fountain of the Virgin" in its behalf. But this fountain is, in fact the main feeder of the waters of Siloe; its healing properties, attributed to it, are due to the west of the Temple area an underground spring called Aire e Schifra. It is, however, quite insignificant, and through the Mohammedan attribute to it curative powers, there does not seem any evidence that they are justified in doing so. The statement of Josephus to which we referred is of special importance. For there can be no doubt that in his day, he must have mentioned it. In the introduction to his Wars of the Jews he promises to mention such notable features of the country as are worthy of note, and in the course of his narrative he does not fail to call the attention of his readers to the various well-known curative springs of Palestine.

But, indeed, the words of St. John, if carefully scrutinized, utterly exclude the supposition of natural causes. They most clearly imply that the cures actually took place; the reply of the sick man to our Lord virtually affirms that he had himself witnessed the instantaneous recovery of those who from time to time were the first to enter the water.

It is unnecessary to weigh the further consideration that the Evangelist does not speak of a "spring" nor of the "bubbling up" of the water, but that he tells us of a pool and of the troubling of the waters—expressions which seem directly inculcated to contradict the theory proposed. The evidence which we have considered above is more than sufficient to make it clear that if the Evangelist is to be believed we have here an account not of a natural phenomenon but of one of our Lord's miracles of the most extraordinary nature. The miraculous occurrences befell on

the Sabbath and on the Sabbath alone. Such is the conclusion which Father Van Beber draws from the fact that the sick man had found no one to aid him to reach the water at the critical moment. The Jews had never ceased to practice the virtue of charity; and it is incredible that a man whose prolonged illness was such as to make him an object deserving of special consideration should have found no one to render him the assistance needed, unless there had been some cause making it impossible for such help to be given. Now we know that the day on which the cure actually took place was the Sabbath; since this formed the ground of the complaint of the Jews against Our Lord. Hence the law of Sabbath observance affords an adequate explanation why the sick man should on that day have been left unaided notwithstanding the fact that there was "a multitude standing in that place." But had the miracles occurred on other days besides the Sabbath he would doubtless have renounced his useless efforts and waited for a day on which the assistance of some charitable person might give him hope of a successful issue. Again it would appear that it was not on the ordinary weekly Sabbaths that the cures took place, but only on those which were marked as festivals of the Jewish worship. We have the evidence not merely of the Talmud but of Tertullian that Jewish custom forbade bathing on the Sabbath. Festal Sabbaths were, however, not subject to many of the minute restrictions which the Jewish doctors had prescribed for the weekly day of rest, and we may well suppose that this was one of the points on which greater freedom was allowed. It is indeed rendered practically certain that this must have been the case, since we find that "the Jews"—in other words, members of the Pharisee party—were present on the occasion of the miracle. Had the day been one on which the prohibition held good, no prospect of a cure would have induced them to permit their afflicted fellow-countrymen to plunge into the healing waters.

Nor are these the only results which our author's analysis arrives at. We learn from V. 3 that the sick man was lying in the porch when the miracle was worked. Here, he tells us, we have an indication that the troubling of the waters did not take place at a single fixed spot in the pool, but at points previously undetermined. Had it been otherwise the sick would almost certainly have taken their positions in some definite order, either according to the length of time during which they had waited or on some other recognized principle of precedence. The circumstances that they simply lay in the porches round the pool can only have arisen from their being ignorant of the spot where the moving of the waters would occur. Further, the answer made by the sick man to Our Lord would appear to show that the movement had occurred several times in his immediate vicinity, as though the author of the miracle regarded him as in a special degree an object of pity. His words, "when I am coming down," imply that infirm as he was he had nevertheless more than once hoped to be the first to reach the water. This could not have been the case unless the disturbance had occurred close to where his bed lay. It is not hard for us to see the good reason why this favor should have been shown to him, for the extraordinary length of his illness probably distinguished him among all the other sick who were present as a fit recipient of the divine bounty. It is true that he was not destined to be healed by the waters of the pool—a yet more signal favor was reserved for him. But these signs of God's pity were not without their result. By directing the attention of all to this man the way for Our Lord's miracle was prepared. The piteous state of the sufferer, and the apparent impossibility of his obtaining relief became matters of public knowledge. Hence, when he was seen to have been restored to health at the word of Jesus of Nazareth, the miracle gained immediate and universal notoriety, and it was beyond the power of any to question its reality.

We are now in a position to understand all the relation of the Bethesda miracle to those of Our Lord, and to show how, so far from tending to lessen the value of Our Lord's miracles as a proof of His claims, they in fact attest His Messiahship with a force that was absolutely overwhelming. The Bethesda miracles have been recognized in Jerusalem as of Divine origin. This appears from the fact that, as the author of the Pharisæes were present at the pool; they could not have countenanced the popular belief that it was the scene of divine interference with the course of nature had they not themselves been satisfied as to the character of the events. The very name "Bethesda" seems to show the same. It seems almost certain that the Syrian version is right in understanding this name to represent the Aramaic "Beth-chesda" (Hebrew, Beth-hachedes) the house of grace. The word chesed is the term specially employed to denote the favors shown by Jehovah to His chosen people; and "Bethesda" would thus signify that the Jews recognized in the miracle a new manifestation of God's peculiar love to their nation. Under these circumstances it can hardly be doubted that they must have seen in them a fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy, "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as a hart and the tongue of the dumb shall be free; for streams are broken out in the desert and waters in the wilderness" (Isaiah 35, 5, 6), and have believed that they portended the immediate coming of the looked-for Deliverer.

Such, in brief outline, is the account of the miracle presented to us by the writer of whom we are speaking. The further part of this paper dealing with the subsequent discourse of Our Lord as understood in the fresh light thrown on the event is even more interesting, but requiring as it does an analysis of the separate text is not adapted for such an article as the present; and any

curtailed account of it would do poor justice to the chain of reasoning developed in it. It must be sufficient to say that all who care to read it will probably pronounce it to be one of the most suggestive pieces of New Testament exegesis that have been published in recent years. Even in our treatment of the subject, the position of Father Van Beber's article the limits of space have compelled us to omit several interesting considerations tending to confirm his theory. But we hope that this brief abstract may suffice to give our readers some idea of the conclusions to which a close analysis of the Sacred Text has led our author. His interpretation of St. John's words, as we said, in many respects completely new, yet it certainly seems to provide for the first time a solution to many, if not to all, of the difficult problems contained in what is confessedly one of the most perplexing incidents related in the Gospel narrative.—London Tablet.

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

BY ANNA C. MISQUEL.

Over the little Southern town lay the languor and sultry stillness of a mid-summer afternoon. The shutters of the dwelling-houses, that stood back from the streets in ample, flower-dotted yards, were tightly closed, as the occupants sought relief from the day's exhaustion in the customary *siesta*; and though the store doors stood open, the proprietors and their clerks dozed behind the counters. At one corner of the main street, rose a building more pretentious than its neighbors—a white, quaint, homelike building, although the sign above the portal proclaimed it to be a hotel. On the sidewalk, in the deep shade thrown by the hotel, stood a row of chairs, now occupied by men, whom business or inclination kept awake. Some were farmers, some professional men, but all were politicians, and notwithstanding the temperature, conversation did not flag.

Over the deserted street sounded the fall of a firm step. It brought a lull to the conversation as the disputants turned their eyes in the direction of the pedestrian, and they did not resume their discussion when they saw the Doctor approaching with bent head.

"Miss Esther must be worse," said one, softly, and at the beautiful woman, aged man, sitting near the doorway, moved uneasily on his chair.

"How's she this evening, Doctah?" queried the speaker, as the physician came up to the line of chairs. The doctor shook his head, and they saw that his face was grave.

"Sinking fast! She will not live through the night!" and as he spoke, involuntarily his eyes singled out the man near the door. With the passing of the Doctor, a hush fell over the men and before the mind of each rose a recollection of the tall, beautiful woman, who, in a little cottage, a few blocks away, was pitting her poor remnant of strength against fell disease. They had no doubt as to the victor. For a long time they had known that Esther Donnelly's days were numbered. Still, the acute realization that her last one was slipping from her filled them with awe. Grim thought, that one hour of the night, for whose relief they were longingly, brought her up a summons to enter another world! The man at the doorway again moved in his chair. A gray had displaced the ruddy glow of health on his face. There was a film before his clear eyes. Presently he rose and entered the house.

"Wonder if this doesn't hurt Jerry a little?" remarked one of the men, and "Looks so," responded his nearest neighbor. "Reck'f if he had it all to do over again he'd do it differently."

"Hang it!" exclaimed another, but in a low voice. "A woman mustn't expect too much of a man. She asked too much of Jerry. Wouldn't do it myself."

"Yes, you would, Dick!" contradicted another, whose face betokened a tragedy, "if you loved her, I tell you, I'd do anything, except what is dishonorable, for the woman he loves."

"And some of them will do the dishonorable, too!" supplemented another.

"I'm speaking of gentlemen," corrected the other.

"So an I!" returned he. "And it wasn't much she asked of him, went on the sidewalk, not heeding the last words. "She only asked him not to become a whisky-seller. I know the story, for he was working on my farm at the time. When old man Donnelly died and left his motherless children to the care of Esther, the oldest of the family, Jerry, who was a chivalrous young fellow, would go over, after work, to give Esther what assistance he could. He always had a long head, and, acting according to his advice, she managed the farm and made more money off it than her father had ever been able to do. She was as pretty a girl as ever stood in shoe leather, and as good. Of course, she grew to love him, and he returned her affection in a way. He had saved some money, and when I found out how matters stood between the young couple, I offered to rent him that hundred acres of my land that adjoined the Donnelly place, for a merely nominal sum. At this juncture, Baley wanted somebody to take the bar of this hotel, and the devil put it into Jerry's head to let farming go and enter the whisky business. I begged the young fellow not to do it, and one of her sisters told me her knees and pleaded with him to let the whisky trade alone, but it was all useless. The engagement was broken off, in consequence. He went behind the bar and she remained on the farm. She educated her three sisters for school-teachers. There was one boy, the youngest of the family. It was her intention to make a farmer of him. But he inherited his father's liking for liquor, and—well, I don't like to charge a man with a crime, yet I can't but think that Jerry helped to increase that fatal inheritance. You know how he went, from bad to worse, and brought such disgrace upon them that the other girls left Kentucky and went out West. But Esther remained, trying to reclaim her brother. When he was thrown from his horse and killed,

on his way home after a night's carousal, she sold the farm to pay his drinking debts. She had about \$500 left, and she bought that little place down street and began to sew for a living. I met her one day last spring, and in the course of our conversation she told me that she had succeeded in paying off the last cent of indebtedness on her home, and was now laying by what she could against that time when she would be no longer able to sew. I saw then that that time was nearer than she thought. Poor Esther!" and with a sign on his lips, the gentleman rose and wended his way toward the white cottage where she lay dying.

After leaving his chair by the door, Jerry went to the clerk's room. The hotel was his own now; so were a number of other pieces of real estate in the little town, while his bank account ran into the tens of thousands. Yes, he had done well in not heeding Esther's squeamish notions, yet—O, those rare evenings of the long ago, when his day's work over, he hurried across the green, shadowed fields to talk to Esther! O, those happy hours spent together! O, those dreams, on his homeward walk, of their tranquil lives. He threw back his right arm as if to strike down memory, and hurried downstairs to the bar-room. The bartender was playing cards with a friend at a table, and continued the game after a familiar nod toward his employer. His companion's back was turned toward Jerry, but the sight of the slender figure and black head sent a chill to his heart. How often Will Donnelly had sat in that chair before that table, with his black head thus bent, as he intently studied the cards in his hand! It always sent that sensation to his heart when he thought of Will Donnelly, for conscience had an uncomfortable way of whispering direful accusations. The liquor he handed across the polished counter had sent many a young life to destruction; but he held himself blameless, since in their cases he was but following the demands of trade. In the case of Esther's brother he was animated by a desire for revenge. And he had had it! Yes, she had come a suppliant to him, and, in the richly furnished parlor upstairs she had pleaded with him to save her brother; but he had said, "Marry me, Esther, and Will shall never taste liquor again!" She had replied: "Quit selling whisky, and I will!" He shuddered now, remembering how he had mocked her with his harsh words and cruel laugh. How could he have been so brutal to a creature so gentle as Esther!

A customer entered and called for a drink. Mechanically he filled the glass and pushed it toward the man and forgot to take the money offered in exchange.

The town was too small for them not to meet. They encountered each other on the streets; they saw each other in the church; they were thrown together at the houses of common friends; but only once afterwards did a word pass between them. Appalled by the dreariness of his present, the utter loneliness of his future, he had stolen to her little cottage one evening, the time the honeysuckle blooms sweetest in Kentucky. Oh, the fragrance of the honeysuckles, clamoring over her low door. She was alone among her flowers. He was alone among her flowers. He would longingly, brought her up a summons to enter another world! The man at the doorway again moved in his chair. A gray had displaced the ruddy glow of health on his face. There was a film before his clear eyes. Presently he rose and entered the house.

Early in the evening he told the night-clerk he could go home, and through the long hours Jerry served his customers himself. When the last debauched creature had reeled away, he sat on alone. The gray of dawn began to dispel the night shadows; Jerry waited. Somewhere a lusty cock announced the coming of another day; yet he stirred not. Then, he heard a footfall on the pavement. Was it some one coming to say that she was dead? Dead! He caught up his hat and fled from the place. His feet carried him to her white cottage. His door stood ajar. He crept in like a thief. She was lying on the bed, near the open window. Her clasped hands rested on the outside of the white coverlid, and the face above already showed the calm of approaching death. In a chair near the other window, worn out with her long vigil, sat the nurse asleep. As he crept to the bed, the dark dark eyes opened full upon him, the pale lips moved.

"At last!" he said. "Esther! my love! Esther, forgive me!" he moaned, falling on his knees, and laying his agonized face on her bosom. She weakly lifted one hand and laid it on his head.

"I forgive you, Jerry!" she whispered. "You did not see until now that it was wrong. Now—"

He lifted his head and looked down into the death-dimmed eyes. "Now, Esther, I will do your bidding! Say once more you forgive me!"

"I love you!" she answered. "Though this happened eighteen years ago, the gossips of that little town will still tell you how on the day of Esther Donnelly's death, Jerry closed his bar-room immediately after the funeral, disposed of all his property, and in the course of a few months mysteriously quitted the county. Where he went or what he did with his money, was for a

long time unknown. But gradually it leaked out that previous to his departure he bestowed large sums upon poor women whose husbands and sons had been among his best customers, settling the money in such a way that the beneficiaries could have none of it for the continuance of their evil habit; while the parish priest, returning from a retreat which he had made at a Benedictine monastery, related to some friends that walking one day over the monks' farm he thought he recognized a familiar face among the laboring Brothers. As he advanced, and before the monk could turn away, he caught a good view of the face, and saw that the bent, rapidly-aging man was Jerry.—Our Lady of Good Counsel.

IMITATION OF CHRIST.

That it is Sweet to Serve God, Despising This World.

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